# THE HISTORY OF THE REVOLT OF THE UNITED NETHERLANDS AGAINST SPANISH RULE

## INTRODUCTION

TRANSLATED BY SUSAN JOHNSON

One of the most remarkable among the events of state, which have made the sixteenth century the most splendid in the world, seems to me the establishment of the Netherlands' freedom. If the glittering deeds of glory-seeking and a destructive appetite for power lay claim to our admiration, how much more so an event, where an oppressed humanity struggles for its noblest rights, where the good cause is paired with unaccustomed powers, and the resources of

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Schiller's great historical account of the Revolt of the Netherlands was first published at the end of October 1788, in Leipzig. Schiller undertook this historical study as background to writing his dramatic poem *Don Carlos, Infante of Spain* (written between 1785 and 1787), a fictional account of the political intrigues surrounding the history of the Revolt of the Netherlands and its relation to the Spanish court. This *Introduction* stands by itself as one of Schiller's finest explications of the principles of republican statecraft. The Schiller Institute plans to publish a new English translation of the full historical work in a later volume.

resolute desperation triumph over the fearsome arts of tyranny in unequal combat. Great and comforting is the reflection, that against defiant usurpations by monarchic force, in the end a remedy is still at hand, that their most calculated designs against human freedom can be spoiled, that a bold-hearted resistance can bend low even the outstretched hand of a despot, heroic perseverance can finally exhaust his terrifying resources. Never did this truth pierce me so vividly as the history of that memorable revolt, which severed the United Netherlands forever from the Spanish crown—and on that account, I regarded it as not unworthy of the effort to set before the world this beautiful memorial of common citizens' strength, to awaken in the breast of my reader a joyful sense of his own individual self, and to give a new incontestable example, of what human beings can dare to hazard for the cause, and what they may accomplish by uniting together.

It is not the extraordinary or heroic in this event, which incites me to describe it. The world's annals have stored up comparable undertakings, which appear still bolder in design, still more brilliant in execution. Many states fall to their ruin with a more magnificent convulsion, with a loftier bound others arise. Likewise, one may expect here no superlative, colossal men, none of the astonishing deeds, which the history of bygone times presents to us in such profuse abundance. Those times are past, those men are no more. In the feeble lap of refinement we have let the energies slacken, which that era exerted and made essential. With dejected admiration we now gaze astonished at these images of giants, as an enervated old fellow at the manly games of youth. Not so in the history at hand. The populace, which we see making its appearance here, was the most peaceable in this part of the world, and less than all its neighbors capable of that heroic spirit, which gives to even the most insignificant action a higher impetus. The force of circumstances surprised them with their own strength and required of them a transitory greatness, which they were never supposed to have and perhaps will never have again.

It is therefore precisely the lack of heroic greatness, which makes this event singular and instructive, and if others set themselves the goal, of showing the superiority of genius to accident, I present here a portrait, in which necessity created genius and accidents made heroes.

Were it ever allowed, to weave a higher providence into human affairs, this history would be the place; so contrary it seems to reason and all experience. Philip II, the mightiest sovereign of his time, whose dreaded superiority of strength threatens to devour all Europe, whose treasures surpass the combined riches of all Christian kings, whose fleets command all the seas; a monarch, whose hazardous objectives many armies serve, armies, which, hardened through long and bloody wars and a Roman discipline, inspired by a defiant national pride and inflamed by the memory of well-fought victories, are thirsting for honor and booty, and move under the audacious genius of their leaders as obedient limbs—this dreaded man, sacrificing himself to an obstinate design, *one* mission the tireless labor of his long reign, all these formidable resources directed to one single purpose, which in the evening of his days he must surrender unfulfilled—Philip II, in a struggle with a few weak nations, which he cannot finish!

And against which nations? Here, a peaceable folk of fishermen and shepherds, in a forgotten corner of Europe, which they were still laboriously wresting from the ocean flood-tide; the sea their workshop, their wealth, and their plague, an independent poverty their highest good, their fame, their virtue. There, a good-natured, well-bred commercial folk, luxuriating in the sumptuous fruits of a blessed diligence, watchful over laws, which were their benefactors. In the fortunate leisure of prosperity, they abandon the anxious sphere of sheer necessities and learn to thirst after higher gratification. The new truth, whose gladdening dawn now breaks over Europe, throws a germinal beam into these favorable regions, and joyfully the free citizen welcomes the light, shunned by sad oppressed slaves. It incites him to test, with a cheerful bravado which readily accompanies

material abundance and liberty, the authority of old accustomed opinions, and to break an ignominious fetter. The heavy scourge of despotism hangs over him, an arbitrary force threatens to tear down the pillars of his good fortune, the custodian of his laws becomes his tyrant. Simple in his statecraft as in his manners, he makes bold to display an old, unused treaty and admonish the lord of both Indies on behalf of natural law. A name decides the entire outcome of things. In Madrid they termed rebellion, that which in Brussels was called merely, a legitimate action; the grievances of Brabant required a politically artful intermediary; Philip II sent them an executioner, and the unleashing of the war was accomplished. An unparalleled tyranny assails life and property. The desperate citizen, left a choice between two kinds of death, chooses the nobler one on the battlefield. A wealthy, lavish people loves peace, but it becomes warlike, when it becomes poor. Now it ceases to tremble for a life, which is to lack everything that made it desirable to preserve. The fury of revolt grips the remotest provinces; trade and commerce come to a halt; the ships vanish from the harbors, the artisan from his workplace, the peasant from the wasted fields. Thousands flee to distant lands, thousands of victims fall on the bloody scaffolds, and fresh thousands hasten thither; divine, then, must be a doctrine, which can be so joyously died for. Still lacking is the final consummating hand—the illumined, initiating spirit, who would seize this great political moment and raise the offspring of accident to the plane of wisdom.

William the Silent consecrates himself, a second Brutus, to the great desire for freedom. Risen above a timorous self-concern, he renounces duties to the throne, the violation of which is punishable, magnanimously divests himself of his princely existence, descends to a voluntary poverty, and is nothing more than a citizen of the world. The just cause is wagered on the gaming-table of battle; but scraped-together hirelings and peaceable farmers cannot withstand the formidable onslaught of an experienced war machine. Twice he leads his disheartened army against the tyrant, twice they,

but not his courage, abandon him. Philip II sends as many reinforcements, as the inhuman greed of his intermediary was making into paupers. Fugitives, cast out of their fatherland, seek a new one on the sea, and on the ships of their enemy seek satisfaction of their vengeance and their hunger. Now corsairs become maritime heroes, a navy assembles out of pirate vessels, and a republic rises up from morasses. Seven provinces all break their fetters: a new youthful state, mighty through union, through its flooding by water, and through desperation. A solemn decree of the nation deposes the tyrant from the throne, the Spanish name disappears from all laws.

Now is an act accomplished, which no longer finds forgiveness; the republic becomes frightened, because she can no longer retreat. Factions rip apart her union, even her dreadful element, the sea, conspiring with her oppressor, threatens an early grave for her tender beginning. She feels her forces succumb to the superior power of the enemy, and throws herself supplicatingly before Europe's mightiest thrones, in order to give away a sovereignty, which she can no longer protect. At last, with difficulty—so contemptibly did this nation-state begin, that even the avarice of foreign kings disdained its young blossoms—she presses her dangerous crown upon a stranger. New hopes refresh her sinking spirit, but destiny gave her a betrayer in this new paternal guardian of the nation, and at the urgent point, when the relentless foe already storms the gates, Charles of Anjou violates the liberty to whose protection he was called. An assassin's hand, besides, tears the helmsman from the rudder, her fate seems sealed, with William of Orange all her redeeming angels fled—but the ship flies ahead in the storm, and the pulsing sails require the pilot's help no longer.

Philip II sees the fruit lost of a deed, which cost him his royal honor and perhaps the secret pride of his unavowed consciousness. Stubbornly and precariously freedom struggles with despotism; murderous battles are fought; a shining array of heroes succeeds one another on the field of honor;

Flanders and Brabant were the school, that trained the field commanders of the coming century. A long, devastating war tramples the yield of the open countryside, victor and vanquished bleed to death, while the emerging maritime state attracted fleeing industry to itself and on the ruins of its neighbors raised up the splendid edifice of its greatness. For forty years endured a war, whose happy conclusion did not rejoice Philip's dying sight, which blotted out one paradise in Europe and created a new one on its ruins—which devoured the bloom of martial youth, enriched an entire continent, and made the possessor of gold-rich Peru a poor man. This monarch, who, without oppressing his realm, might expend nine-hundred tons of gold, who extorted yet far more through tyrannical artifices, heaped a debt of a hundred and forty million ducats on his depopulated realm. An irreconcilable hatred of freedom devoured all these treasures and fruitlessly consumed his royal life; but the Reformation flourished under the devastation of his sword, and out of citizens' blood the new republic raised its victorious flag.

This extraordinary turn of events seems to border on a miracle; but many things combined, to break the power of this king and to cast favor on the progress of the young state. Were the whole weight of his strength fallen on the United Provinces, there was no salvation for her religion, her liberty. His own ambition came to the rescue of her weakness, as it compelled him, to divide his strength. The costly policy of hiring traitors in every cabinet of Europe, the subsidies for the League in France, the uprising of the Moors in Grenada, the conquest of Portugal, and the opulent construction of the Escurial, at last exhausted his seemingly immeasurable treasures and prevented him from acting with spirit and energy in the field. The German and Italian troops, which only the hope of booty had lured under his flag, now angrily mutinied, because he could not pay them, and faithlessly deprived their leader of their effectiveness at the decisive moment. These formidable instruments of oppression now turned their dangerous strength against the

King himself and vented their hostile rage in the provinces that remained loyal to him. That ill-fated mobilization of arms against Britain, on which he, like a frenzied gambler, staked the whole power of his kingdom, completed his collapse; with the Armada perished the tribute of both Indies and the best of the Spanish breed of heroes.

But to the same extent that Spanish power spent itself, the republic won fresh life. The gaps torn by the new religion, the tyranny of the Inquisition, the raging plunder of the soldier rabble, and the ravages of a long wearisome war without intermission in the provinces of Brabant, Flanders, and Hainault, which were the garrisons and storehouses of this costly war, naturally rendered it each year more difficult to maintain and replenish the armies. The Catholic Netherlands had already lost one million citizens, and the trampled fields no longer nourished their ploughmen. Spain itself could spare few more men. These regions, taken unawares by a sudden prosperity, which gave rise to idleness, had greatly declined in population and could not long maintain these exportations of men to the New World and the Netherlands. Few among them saw their fatherland again; these few had left it as youths and now came back as exhausted old men. Gold having become more common made soldiers more and more expensive; the prevailing impulse toward effeminate indulgence raised the price of the opposite virtues. Matters stood quite otherwise with the rebels. All the thousands, which the viceroy's inhuman cruelty had driven from the southern Netherlands, the Huguenot war from France, and the coercion of conscience from other regions of Europe, all were theirs. Their recruiting-ground was the entire Christian world. The fanaticism of the persecutors, as of the persecuted, worked in their behalf. The fresh inspiration of a newly proclaimed doctrine, vengefulness, hunger, and hopeless misery drew adventurers from all quarters of Europe under their flags. Everything which was won for the new doctrine, which was suffered at the hands of the despot or still to be feared of him in the future, made the destiny of this new republic as it were its own. Every

mortification undergone at a tyrant's hands, bestowed a citizen's right in Holland. Men hastened toward a country, where freedom raised its gladdening flag, where respect and safety and revenge on her oppressors were assured to fugitive religion. When we consider the confluence of every people in today's Holland, who upon entering her territory regain their human rights, what must it have been then, when all the rest of Europe still groaned under a mournful oppression of spirit, when Amsterdam was well-nigh the sole free port of entry to all opinions? Many hundreds of families found safety for their wealth in a country which the ocean and domestic concord protected with equal power. The republican army was at full strength, without the necessity of dismantling the plough. Amidst the stir of arms bloomed industry and trade, and the tranquil citizen enjoyed in advance all the fruits of liberty, which would be first contended for with foreign blood. At the very time when the republic of Holland was still struggling for her existence, she advanced the borders of her territory across the ocean and quietly built up her East Indies thrones.

Still more, Spain conducted this costly war with dead, infertile gold, which never returned into the hand which gave it away, yet raised the price of all necessities in Europe. The treasure-chambers of the republic were industry and commerce. Time diminished Spain's resources, multiplied the republic's. To precisely the extent that the resources of the imperial government exhausted themselves through the long continuance of the war, the republic began for the first time to actually reap its harvest. It was a husbanded, remunerative sowing, which gave late, but hundredfold returns; the tree, from which Philip broke himself fruits, was a felled trunk and did not again bear green.

Philip's adverse destiny willed that all the treasure, which he squandered toward the downfall of the provinces, helped to enrich those very provinces. That uninterrupted outflow of Spanish gold had spread wealth and luxury through all of Europe; Europe, however, received her increased requirements for the most part from the hands of

the Netherlands, which commanded the trade of the entire known world and determined the price of all goods. Even during this war Philip could not prevent the republic of Holland from trading with his own subjects, indeed he could not even wish to do so. He himself defrayed for the rebels the costs of their defense; precisely the war, which was meant to destroy them, increased the sale of their goods. The monstrous outlay for his fleets and armies flowed for the most part into the treasury of the republic, which was allied with the commercial centers of Flanders and Brabant. What Philip set in motion *against* the rebels, operated indirectly *for* them. All the immeasurable sums, which a forty-year war devoured, were poured into the casks of the Danaïdes* and disappeared into a bottomless depth.

The sluggish course of this war did the King of Spain as much harm, as it brought the rebels advantages. His army was largely put together out of the remainder of those victorious troops, who under Charles V had already gathered their laurels. Age and long service entitled them to rest; many among them, enriched by the war, impatiently wished themselves back at home, to end in comfort a toilsome life. Their former zeal, their heroic fire and manly discipline slackened to the same degree, that they believed themselves to have discharged their duty and honor, and began at last to reap the fruits of so many campaigns. Additionally, troops which were accustomed to vanquish any resistance through the fierceness of their attack, could not help wearying of a war, which was conducted less with men than with elements, which exercised one's patience more than it satisfied the lust for fame, in which the combat was less against danger than against hardship and scarcity.

Neither their individual courage nor their long experience of warfare could prove useful to them in a country, whose peculiar conditions often gave even the most cowardly native advantages over them. Lastly, on foreign soil *one* defeat injured them more, than *many* victories over an enemy, on his own territory, could profit them. With the rebels the case was exactly the opposite. In such a tedious,

long-drawn-out war, where no decisive battle took place, the weaker adversary was ultimately compelled to learn from the stronger, small defeats accustomed him to danger, small victories fueled his confidence. At the opening of the civil war the republican army hardly dared to show themselves to the Spanish in the field; the war's long duration trained and hardened them. As the royal army became weary of success, the rebels' self-confidence rose along with their better martial training and experience. At last, after half a century, master and pupil, unvanquished, parted as equal combatants.

Further, during the entire course of this war, the side of the rebels acted with more cohesion and unity than the side of the King. Before the former lost their first commander, the royal administration of the Netherlands had passed through no fewer than five different hands. The irresolution of the Princess of Parma imparted itself to the cabinet in Madrid and allowed it within a short time to wander through nearly all maxims of statecraft. The Duke of Alba's unbending harshness, the leniency of his successor Requesens, Don Juan of Austria's cunning deceit and malice, and the energetic Caesarian bent of the Prince of Parma, gave this war just as many contrary directions, while the plan of the rebellion, in the single head where it dwelt clear and vivid, always remained the same. The greater evil was, that the maxims for the most part missed the moment, in which they might be applied. At the beginning of the unrest, when the preponderance was manifestly still on the side of the King, when a swift resolve and manly steadiness could still suffocate the rebellion in its cradle, the reins of government were allowed to wobble feebly to and fro in the hands of a woman. After the uprising became an actual explosion, the strength of the rebel factions and of the King was more balanced, and a clever flexibility alone could avert the impending civil war, the viceroyship fell to a man who at this post lacked precisely this single virtue. So watchful an observer as William the Silent missed none of the advantages which the faulty policy of his opponents gave him, and

with quiet diligence he slowly advanced toward the object of his great undertaking.

But why did Philip II not himself appear in the Netherlands? Why would he rather exhaust the most improbable remedies, simply in order not to attempt the sole thing, which could not strike amiss? To break the arrogant power of the nobility, there was no more natural expedient than the presence of the ruler in person. By the side of majesty every private dimension of greatness could not but sink, every other aspect of authority expire. Instead of the truth flowing through so many contaminated channels slowly and obscurely toward the distant throne, so that deferred measures of resistance allowed time for an action of heedlessness to ripen into an action of deliberate judgment, his own penetrating gaze would have distinguished truth from error; not his humanity, but cold statecraft alone would have saved the realm a million citizens. The nearer their source, the more forceful would be his edicts; the thicker on their target, the weaker and more disheartened the blows of the uprising. It requires infinitely more, to inflict to his face the evil, one may well venture against an absent enemy. The rebellion seemed at first to tremble at its own name and decked itself for a long time in the clever subterfuge of taking under its protection the cause of the sovereign against the arbitrary usurpations of his governor. Philip's appearance in Brussels would have put an end to this juggler's trick at once. Now the rebels would be obliged to live up to their false pretenses, or throw off the mask and condemn themselves through their true character of violence. And what relief for the Netherlands, had his presence spared them only that evil, which was heaped upon them without his knowledge and against his will! What gain for himself, had it served toward nothing further, than to watch over the use of the immeasurable sums, which, raised illegally for the requirements of the war, disappeared into the thieving hands of his stewards! What his proxies had to compel through the unnatural device of terror, would have been wholeheartedly forthcoming to his majesty. What made

those proxies into objects of horror, would have earned him fear at most; for the abuse of hereditary power oppresses less painfully than the abuse of delegated power. His presence would have saved thousands, if he were simply nothing more than a thrifty despot; if he were not even *that*, the dread of his person would have preserved for him a territory, which was lost through hatred and scorn for his instruments.

Just as the oppression of the people of the Netherlands became an urgent affair to all men conscious of their rights, one might think, that the insubordination and revolt of this people would be a rallying-call to all princes, to protect their own privileges by protecting their neighbor's. But this time, envy of Spain triumphed over political sympathy, and the leading powers of Europe, more or less publicly, took the side of freedom. Emperor Maximilian II, although obligated to the Spanish house through ties of relationship, gave it just cause for the accusation of having favored the rebels' party in secret. Through the offer of his mediation he tacitly granted their grievances a degree of justification, which would surely encourage the rebels to insist upon them all the more resolutely. Under an emperor honestly devoted to the Spanish court, William of Orange would have had difficulty drawing so many troops and funds from Germany. France, without openly and formally breaking the peace, placed a prince of the blood at the head of the Netherlands' rebellion; the latter's operations were carried out for the most part with French funds and troops. Elizabeth of England simply wreaked a justified revenge and retaliation, when she protected the insurgents against their legitimate overlords, and if her frugal assistance only sufficed at most to avert the total ruin of the republic, this was infinitely much, at a point when hope alone could extend their exhausted courage. With these two powers Philip still stood at the time in a peace compact, and both became traitors to him. Between the strong and the weak, candid honesty is often no virtue; he who is feared, rarely gains advantage from the finer ties which bind equal with equal. Philip had himself banished truth from political intercourse, himself

dissolved morality between kings, and made deception the deity of the cabinet. Without ever taking pleasure in his ascendancy, he was obliged his whole life through to contend with the envy he awakened in others. Europe let him suffer for misusing a power, whose full use in fact he had never possessed.

If, weighed against the inequality of the two combatants, which at first glance is so astonishing, one takes into consideration all accidents, which were inimical to the first and favorable to the other, this event's supernatural aspect disappears, but the extraordinary aspect remains—and one has found a just metric, to estimate these republicans' own credit for achieving their freedom. Yet one should not think, that the undertaking itself was preceded by such a precise calculation of forces, or that, as they entered upon this uncertain sea, the republicans were already acquainted with the shore on which they afterward landed. In the intent of its originators the action did not appear so developed as it ultimately stood in its accomplishment, any more than the perpetual division of the faith appeared before Luther's mind, when he stood up against the sale of indulgences. What a difference between the modest procession of those beggars in Brussels, who supplicate for a more humane treatment as for a boon, and the dreadful majesty of a free state, which treats with kings as its equals and within less than a century disposes of the throne of its former tyrant! The unseen hand of fate led forth the spent arrow in a higher trajectory and a wholly different direction than the bowstring had given it. In the womb of fortunate Brabant was born the freedom, which, torn from its mother as a newborn child, was to bless despised Holland. But the undertaking itself ought not appear to us as a lesser one because it turned out otherwise than it was intended. The individual works, polishes, and forms the rough stone, which the era brings his way; to him belong the moment and the place, but accident drives world history. If the passions, which during this event actively manifested themselves, were but not unworthy of the work they served

unawares—if the forces, which they helped put into effect, and the particular actions, from whose linkage the event wondrously sprang up, were but in themselves noble forces, beautiful and great actions, then the event is great, interesting, and fruitful for us, and we are at liberty to marvel over the bold offspring of accident, or to elevate our admiration to a higher understanding.

The history of the world is self-consistent, like the laws of nature, and unitary, like the individual soul of man. The same conditions bring back the same phenomena. On just this soil, where now the Netherlands defy their Spanish tyrants, fifteen hundred years earlier their forefathers, the Batavi and Belgae, struggled with their Roman counterparts. In the same way as the Netherlanders were unwillingly subjected to a proud ruler, abused in the same way by rapacious satraps, they threw off their chains with like defiance and sought their fortune in just as unequal combat. The same conqueror's pride, the same ardor of a nation, in the Spaniards of the sixteenth century and in the Romans of the first, the same valor and manly training in both armies, the same terror inspired by their battle formations. There as here we see stratagem contend against superior strength, and perseverance, supported by unity, wear out a monstrous force, which has weakened itself through division. There as here, private enmity arms the nation; a single individual, born for his time, reveals to it the dangerous secret of its powers and leads its mute grief to a bloody manifesto. "Confess, Batavi!" Claudius Civilis addresses his fellow citizens in the sacred grove, "are we still treated by these Romans as allies and friends, or not instead as servile subjects? We are handed over to their prefects and governors, who, when our plunder, our blood, has satiated them, are replaced by others, who simply renew the same violent atrocities under other names. If it finally happens, that Rome sends us an inspector general, he oppresses us with a swaggering and costly entourage and an even more insufferable pride. The conscriptions approach once again, which tear children from parents, brothers from brothers forever,

and deliver our vigorous youth over to Roman lechery. Now, Batavi, is the moment ours. Never did Rome lie prostrate as now. Let not this *name* 'legions' pursue you in terror; their camps contain nothing but old men and booty. We have footsoldiers and horsemen. Germany is ours, and Gaul would fain throw off its yoke. Let Syria serve them, and Asia, and the East, which needs kings! There are still those among us who were born before tribute was paid to the Romans. The gods side with the bravest." Solemn sacraments consecrate their conspiracy, like that of the Gueux League; like the latter, it hides itself cunningly in the cloak of submissiveness, in the majesty of a great name. The cohorts of Civilis swear an oath on the Rhine to Vespasian in Syria, as the compromise was sworn with Philip II. The same field of combat produces the same plan of defense, the same recourse for desperation. Both entrusted their foundering fortunes to a friendly element; in similar distress Civilis saves his island—as fifteen centuries after him William of Orange the city of Leyden—through an artificial flood. The valor of the Batavi exposes the impotence of the ruler of the world, as the beautiful courage of their descendants exhibits to all of Europe the decline of Spanish power. The same fertility of mind in the military leaders of both times allowed the war to persist with equal stubbornness and to show an almost equally doubtful outcome; but we note one difference, nevertheless: the Romans and Batavi made war humanely, for they did not make war on behalf of religion.[1]

## Notes

* *Translator's note:* In Greek legend, the forty-nine daughters of the King of Argos, who killed their husbands at their father's command, were condemned in Hades to pour water into broken containers forever.

1. *Author's note:* Tacitus, *Histories*, books IV, V.